Australian Primary Schools Mental Health Initiative

Disability: Suggestions for school staff

Students with disabilities require extra support to ensure their learning and developmental needs are met. A learning environment that emphasises inclusion and cooperation supports all students, both those with and without additional needs. Showing students how to value the differences in others and taking steps to address safety issues, such as bullying, helps students with disabilities to feel accepted and to belong at school. The following suggestions may also be helpful for school staff.

Be informed: do your research

Knowing about how a particular disability may affect a student helps with creating an inclusive environment and meeting the student's learning, social and developmental needs. Seek advice and support from special education services or from health professionals involved with the student, or seek resources from relevant information services that are backed up by good evidence.

Build strengths

Students with disabilities require a curriculum that is tailored to their needs. An individual learning plan should be created that addresses students' needs and builds on existing strengths. Working collaboratively with the student to identify learning strengths and interests is important for building engagement in learning and matching needs. Assess what the student can do and build on it step-by-step to ensure learning is a successful experience for the student and builds up their confidence. This applies to the academic curriculum and also to development of social and emotional skills.

Work collaboratively with parents

Working closely and respectfully with parents and carers is crucial for meeting the complex needs of students with disabilities. Collaborative involvement from parents and carers in the development of individual learning plans for students is especially beneficial. This can enhance learning outcomes and build a sense of belonging for children and their families. Take special care to ensure that parents and carers of students with disabilities know who they can contact at the school for help and support, and what resources are available to them and their child. Maintaining a home-communication booklet or establishing a regular time to 'touch base' is often very helpful for teachers to keep in regular contact with parents and carers and exchange vital information about the progress and wellbeing of students.

Promote acceptance and caring

Teaching students about acceptance begins with your own personal beliefs and demonstration of inclusive behaviour in the classroom. Promote respect and inclusion by acknowledging that we are all 'differently abled', and through emphasising cooperative and caring relationships. When introducing a student with a disability to the class, the focus should be on the whole student and their strengths and abilities, rather than highlighting their disability.

Provide opportunities for social support

Social relationships can be difficult for students with disabilities. Provide structured support through teaching social and emotional skills. Setting up a buddy system, or providing for peer tutoring in structured classroom activities, are examples of strategies that can be particularly beneficial for student with disabilities – and for promoting cooperation and caring with all students.

Provide opportunities for active participation in school

Children with disabilities need to be able to participate in everyday school activities along with their peers. Adaptations to teaching methods, curriculum and the physical environment in the classroom and playground may be required. Extra support staff may be needed so that students with disabilities can participate in school-based excursions.

The Department of Education website for your state or territory provides policy information and practical guidelines for teaching and supporting students with disabilities at school.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au**

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